Historic England

Shrines (Roman and Post-Roman)

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Roman and post-Roman shrines. Descriptions of the asset type and its development as well as its associations and a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover
The Carrawburgh mithraeum, Northumberland. Beyond the narthex (entrance area) the two areas of grass mark the position of benches with altar at the rear of the building. Between Chester's and Housesteads Roman forts, it is an English Heritage property open to the public.

Introduction

Roman-period shrines and temples are relatively common in comparison with those for the preceding and succeeding periods, largely by virtue of the more substantial nature of many of the remains.

Many aspects of Roman-period religion are well known, including its generally polytheistic nature and its toleration and absorption of most local religious practices and new faiths – the alleged Roman aversion to Druidism may have as much to do with the perceived political influence of the Druids as with Roman revulsion in respect of human sacrifice. Similarly the lack of toleration of monotheistic faiths, notably Judaism and Christianity, may have been as much political, given the refusal of their adherents to acknowledge state cults and the acceptance of the Roman order that such observance implied, as it was grounded in religious dogma.

The key Roman observances were the Imperial Cult, attested in Britain in various cities including Colchester, London and York, and the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) who are well-evidenced. That said, most other major Roman gods are also represented in the British archaeological record, including Mars, Mercury, Hercules and Vulcan. The equation of British gods with gods from the Roman pantheon was common, such as Sulis (the Celtic name of the goddess) and Minerva (the Roman equivalent thereof) at Bath, but by no means obligatory as witnessed by the shrine to Coventina, an 'un-equated' Celtic goddess, at Carrawburgh (Northumberland).

The multiplicity of gods and spirits (such as the *Genii loci* – Spirits of Place, including the *Lar familiaris* who presided over the household) demonstrate how religion pervaded all aspects of being for most in the Roman period and how religion cannot be readily separated from daily life. The diversity of Roman-period religion can perhaps be best seen through the variety of cults originating outside the Empire, or within conquered territories, that are recognisable in the archaeological record; major exotic deities include Isis and Serapis from Egypt, Cybele and Atys from Asia Minor, and Mithras from the Near East.

Much of the evidence for religion in the Roman period is in the form of portable material - altars and explicitly religious artefacts such as statuettes of deities – as well as items that have clear votive or talismanic significance, such as phallic symbols.

In the post-Roman period shrines were used as places of Pagan or (from the time of Augustine's mission to Kent in 597) Christian worship until the 7th century. The archaeological evidence for such shrines is rare, with the majority of examples so far identified being from the south-west of England in rural, isolated settings, frequently located on hilltops. They appear as foundations of small circular or rectangular buildings or structures, usually found in association with other features such as prehistoric sites, hillforts, Roman temples, cemeteries and churches, and natural features such as springs and caves.

Although sites may appear as cropmarks in aerial photography or as low earthworks, their identity would need to be confirmed by archaeological

excavation. Very few sites have been identified through archaeological investigations in England and of those only Yeavering (Northumberland) provides evidence for pagan worship. Place-name evidence can also be used to identify potential sites that may be indicative of pagan places of worship because they contain elements of Anglo-Saxon words for temple, sacred grove, idol, holy place or shrine as found in Harrow (Middlesex) and Weeford (Staffordshire). Place-names incorporating these pagan elements are concentrated in the midlands and south-east of England.

1 Description

For the Roman period it is perhaps best to separate the description of temples from shrines, the latter taken here to mean slighter or less formalised religious structures. There are three basic plan forms of temple: Romano-Celtic, Classical and Basilican, although as will be discussed below these generalised categories are subject to many exceptions. Shrines are far more varied in form, ranging from formally constructed buildings such as the semi-circular structure associated with the temple at Coleshill, (Warwickshire), through minor structures such as nymphaea, to other foci, for example the Bronze Age barrow at Irlingborough (Northamptonshire) that became a focus for coin offerings, or the Iron Age Ferry Fryston (West Yorkshire) 'chariot burial' barrow which attracted offerings of cattle for up to 500 years, into the 2nd century AD. While perhaps not technically 'shrines' the house church at Lullingstone (Kent) Roman villa and other religious structures associated with Christianity represent a further group of Roman-period religious structures.

Romano-Celtic temples represent by far the most common plan form. In essence the main structure often consists of two concentric elements, with the inner one forming the *cella* or religious focus, and the outer square an ambulatory around it. In plan they can be square, circular, rectangular or polygonal and the most common reconstruction is as a central tower surrounded by a lower ambulatory (Figure 1). They often, but not without exception, stand within a *temenos*, or sacred enclosure.

In size they vary considerably, with the outer dimensions of ambulatories varying from about 8.5 m to about 22 m and those of *cellae* from about 5.1 m to about 16 m. Continental examples can be larger, for example the 'Temple of Janus' at Autun, in France, the ambulatory of which was

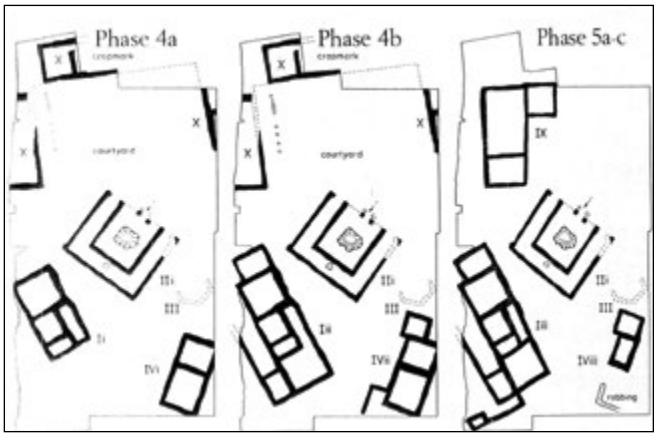

Figure 1
West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire. Extract from the site phase plans showing some developments within the shrines complex.

28 m square. On balance polygonal-plan temples tend to be larger than square-plan examples.

Romano-Celtic temples occur in both urban and rural Roman-period locations. Some form part of religious complexes where there appears to be continuity of religious focus from the Iron Age, as at Hayling Island (Hampshire.) where a circular Iron Age 'shrine' was succeeded in the Roman period by a circular stone-built structure with a portico in place of the shrine. At the Springhead temple complex in Kent there appears to be no clear evidence of structural continuity from the Iron Age to Roman period, but nevertheless the springs on the site seem to have been venerated throughout.

Considerable structural variety in Romano-Celtic temple forms have been observed. At Hayling Island the Roman temple lacks an ambulatory immediately around the *cella*, but has rather a, probably internally porticoed, enclosure 40 m by 43 m. At Jordan Hill, near Weymouth (Figure 2), the temple similarly lacked an ambulatory, although here this probably reflected the

Figure 2
Jordan Hill, Dorset. The surviving remains of the cella of the 4th century AD Roman temple. Near Weymouth, this English Heritage property is open to the public.

robbing of the site. Equally structures can display distinctive additional features, such as the external buttresses known at Pagan's Hill, Somerset, while broadly conforming to the usual plan forms.

Classical temples are rectangular stone-built structures that are relatively less common than Romano-Celtic temples, but are an important element in the religious landscape of Roman Britain. Of iconic status is the temple of the deified Claudius at Colchester that is today represented by its 32 m by 23.5 m podium which forms the platform for the Norman keep of Colchester castle.

While little more is known about the plan of the Colchester temple, that to Sulis Minerva at Bath is better understood. The podium of the structure is in essence an infilled vault that gave the whole building height, 3.5 m at Colchester, to create a visual impression of dominance of the area as well as supporting the *cella*. The latter was usually located behind a portico, or *pronaos*, that was often approached by steps. The sides of the *cella* would usually be adorned with engaged or free stone columns, and the frontage would include a pediment.

The extent of decoration is variable, although columns of both Corinthian and Iconic orders are known to be associated with Classical temples and there could be much use of marble and stone panelling. The outer long sides of the podium could be lined with free columns supporting the roof, following the plan forms well known from the Continent or, as in the case of Wroxeter I (Shropshire), appear rather as a compromise between the classical and Romano-Celtic plans incorporating a porticoed *cella* and entrance,

both probably with free columns and pediments, but separated by an elongated internal courtyard with porticoes on two sides reminiscent of Hayling Island.

The temple would usually be located within a *temenos*, or sacred enclosure, although it is possible to argue that the whole of the walled area of Bath was a religious complex. The identification of 'Temples' I-VII at Corbridge has been challenged by various authors, although architectural fragments do suggest the presence of classical temples somewhere within the town.

Basilican temples are conventionally oblong apsidal structures that represent a functionally defined sub-group of a standard Roman-period building form – similar plans can be observed in military headquarters building (*principia*) and forum basilicas in towns.

The key element of a basilican temple is the presence of an aisled nave and many have a square or semi-circular 'apse', and some a narthex or antechamber between the entrance and nave. The size can vary considerably from the London mithraeum at about 20 m by 8 m to around 8.5 m by 6 m for the first phase at Carrawburgh (Northumberland; Figure 3).

Figure 3
The Carrawburgh mithraeum, Northumberland. Beyond the narthex (entrance area) the two areas of grass mark the position of benches with altar at the rear of the building. Between Chester's and Housesteads Roman forts, it is an English Heritage property open to the public.

The inclusion of mithraea in the group emphasises again the lack of homogeneity of the type – the Mithraic rite demanded a structure of a particular form, with a floor below ground level simulating a cave, benches along the sides for devotees and a focus on the cult relief of Mithras killing the bull. Other cults were less distinctive, and recognition of the structure by form alone is less clear. However, there is every likelihood that votive deposits (items left for ritual purposes) are associated with Romano-British temples and the identification of depositional practices could help with the recognition of temple sites. Cults, such as that worshipped in the 4th century temple at Silchester, may have demanded light and the inclusion of a clerestory in contrast with the mithraea.

Known basilican temples are located largely in the south and close to the northern frontier, but given their basic plan form and relative lack of distinctive characteristics examples could be going unrecognised. Where known, they are generally constructed of stone at least at foundation and lower wall levels, although given the limitations of the evidence the upper parts of the walls could have been half-timbered. Internally, timber could have been used in aisle arcades, at least in smaller examples and was certainly used in some cases for screens between narthex and nave as well as for flooring and benches in mithraea, although other flooring materials including stone slabs, tessellated pavements and mosaics are also known.

Other temples are in many cases essentially variations on the three main types, but sufficiently different to not readily fit the basic models. The temple to Antenociticus at Benwell (Tyne & Wear), 7 m by 5 m with a small semi-circular apse, is essentially basilican in plan form, but the scale precludes regarding it as such. Equally the Triangular Temple at Verulamium (St Albans, Hertfordshire) represents a pragmatic response to the limitations of its site, incorporating a possible pedimented entrance giving on to a possibly porticoed courtyard leading to a *cella* or shrines at the rear of the complex – all elements that can be seen elsewhere, but not in a comparable form.

The temple from the northern suburb of Catterick (North Yorkshire) can be seen as either adapting a Romano-Celtic plan albeit with an elongated *cella*, or as a variation on a classical form, in either case probably lacking a *temenos*.

Shrines is a widely interpreted term, and sites such as Nettleton (Wiltshire) where a substantial octagonal building is generally described as a 'shrine' to Apollo, illustrate the problem of definition. The central structure, while not readily fitting the conventional plan of any of the 'temple' categories above, is built on a scale that suggests that it is in effect a variation of a Romano-Celtic temple.

Similar issues appear in a later Roman context where significant religious elements have been recognised on a number of what are apparently villa sites. The unpublished excavations at Littlecote, Wiltshire, illustrate this – what appears to be a relatively modest villa on the Silchester to Mildenhall road had its baths enlarged in the mid-4th century and a 'triconch' hall constructed and furnished with an elaborate Orpheus mosaic. It has been suggested that this may have been a focus for the cult of Bacchus, although it may be no more than an elaborate summer dining room, illustrating the extent to which religious iconography and possibly religious practice infiltrated daily life.

The shrine at the Coleshill Temple has already been mentioned and secondary shrines are well known on temple sites, such as that dedicated to the local nymphs and genius outside the mithraeum at Carrawburgh (Figure 3).

Rural shrines are a difficult area – the well-known site on Scargill Moor, near Bowes, County Durham, consists of two isolated shrines with altars dedicated to Vinotonus, who on one altar is conflated with Silvanus, perhaps suggesting an association with hunting. Without the altars any recognition of this site as religious would have been difficult, and it is possible that small rural shrines could take many forms.

At Westhawk Farm, Ashford, Kent, excavation revealed a rectilinear ditched enclosure surrounding a polygonal post-built structure interpreted as a shrine; that would probably not have been understood if it had not been totally stripped, revealing a probably associated waterhole which had received votive deposits (that is items left for ritual purposes). The ritual use of features such as waterholes is documented elsewhere, for example at Shiptonthorpe, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and suggests that Roman period religious foci that lack readily identifiable structural features may escape recognition unless deposit survival and serendipitous excavation produces evidence of votive deposition.

In military contexts the headquarters building incorporated the regimental shrine (*sacellum* or *aedes*), while urban sites such as Cirencester have produced Jupiter Columns that would have stood outside in the street or at another public location and which appear to have had a public religious function.

Christian churches could also in essence be viewed as shrines with a particular dedication, and they often conform to plan forms as described above. For example the probable Silchester church is a west-facing basilican structure incorporating a narthex and semi-circular apse, but is marked out by virtue of the presence of a baptistery outside the narthex and widened transepts at the west end of the aisles.

Other structures are less visually distinct, such as the possible church at Icklingham, Suffolk, a simple rectangular building associated with a possibly Christian cemetery, a suggested baptistery and two lead baptismal tanks. Various rectilinear structures at pagan temple sites have been suggested as later Christian churches, such as at Uley, Gloucestershire.

On military sites churches have been suggested at Richborough, Kent, there associated with a baptistery, and at various sites on or near Hadrian's Wall, including apsidal structures at South Shields, Housesteads and Vindolanda. However, the best attested church in Britain is

not a separate structure, but rather the house-church at Lullingstone evidenced in large part by fallen wall plaster featuring chi-rhos and images of probable Christian worshipers, rather than distinctive structural evidence. Other house-churches may be indicated by the presence of Christian imagery, such as the probable head of Christ from Hinton St Mary, Dorset, while at the Frampton villa, also in Dorset, structural components of the site recall a basilican plan with an apse and narthex and the decoration includes a chi-rho.

Sites of Uncertain Function There were clearly religious monument types that no longer survive, such as the beehive structure known to have survived until 1743 – Arthur's O'on at Carron on Scotland, which may have been a temple to Victory, or given its location north of The Antonine Wall, a *tropaeum*, an official monument dedicated to Victory.

The temple mausoleum at Lullingstone may indicate another area of uncertainty with commemoration of the dead being aggregated with religious observance, in which case it may be simplistic to take as read the primary burial function of all features claimed as mausolea, particular given their potential similarity to Arthur's O'on.

Post-Roman shrines are small circular or rectangular wooden or stone structures or buildings which provided the setting for Christian or Pagan worship. Post-Roman shrines are very rare and at present we know of few examples. These probably represent only a fraction of the shrines which existed and which are frequently referred to in contemporary literature by Bede and others; many have probably left little archaeological trace or the evidence lies under Anglo-Saxon or later churches and monasteries.

The main components of a post-Roman shrine are building foundations or foundation trenches, graves, free-standing posts or platforms which are sometimes set within an enclosure wall or bank. Some shrines re-used earlier sites and buildings and show remarkable continuity in the use of the place or site for ritual purposes over four millennia from the Neolithic to the 7th century AD. Others were built as completely new constructions in the 5th or 6th century AD and were used for only a short period of time. An example is an early 7th century AD building excavated at the Northumbrian palace site of Yeavering. This was rectangular, about 12 m x 6 m internally, and was interpreted as a temple because of its association with a pit full of ox skulls, and human graves, clustered to its south (Figure 4).

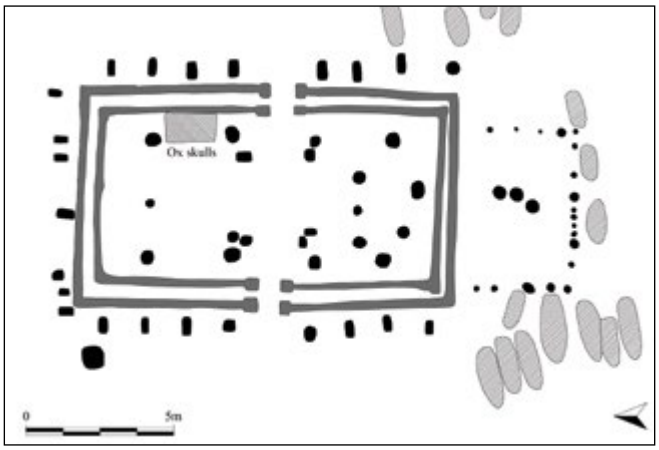

Figure 4
Yeavering, Northumberland. Possible 7th century shrine.

Once shrines went out of use they appear to have been abandoned or incorporated into later ecclesiastical buildings. Because of their close associations they can sometimes be confused with earlier shrines and temples as well as the remains of small structures of a later date with quite different functions. However, they can be distinguished by careful analysis of associated artefacts and stratigraphical analysis resulting from archaeological excavation.

We still know little about the landscape beyond the shrines themselves and what links they may have had with contemporary settlements and society beyond an assumed local or individual responsibility for their maintenance. There are many literary references to English pagan worship in, for example, Bede's Ecclesiastical History of about AD 731. These frequently refer to altars and idols and occasionally to heathen rites. However, they rarely describe pagan sites or provide topographical detail linking them to known archaeological sites.

2 Chronology

In chronological terms many of the sites of Roman-Celtic temples that have been subject to excavation can be traced back to the late Pre-Roman Iron Age, and on some sites, such as Hayling Island, continuity from the pre-Roman period has been demonstrated. The same may be true for the religious centre at Bath where an Iron Age focus has been suggested to precede the classical temple to Sulis Minerva. On the other hand, although pre-Roman religious sites are known in the Colchester area, for example at Gosbecks, the Colchester temple of Divus Claudius was an entirely new creation designed to send a political message demonstrating the existence of the new order. Construction was probably in hand by AD 54 in Nero's reign, and it seems that once established major temples remained in use for much or all of the Roman period.

Whilst the Edit of Milan in AD 313 allowed for religious toleration, seemingly allowing Christianity to flourish without the threat of persecution, it did not bring an end to the development of new pagan shrines. The temple to Nodens at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire, for instance, was founded in the late 3rd or early 4th century and enjoyed considerable investment of resources in the later 4th century. Other pagan sites remained in use into the late 4th or 5th century, and while destruction by Christians has been claimed at some the evidence is often equivocal.

Post-Roman shrines were in use from the 5th to the 7th centuries, after which Christianity and worship in churches became widespread throughout England. Individual shrines were in use for varying lengths of time and very few have been securely dated. Because of this there is little evidence for any chronological development. Most examples have been identified during the archaeological investigation of associated features such as hillforts, cemeteries, Roman temples and cathedrals, and these earlier and later structures and features have provided relative dating evidence.

3 Associations

In the Roman period temples and shrines are found on most site types. In urban locations these can be extremely prominent at the heart of the settlement, as well as alongside major roads. A temple could be the focus for a considerable complex, as at Nettleton, Wiltshire, and it can be argued that the religious aspects of 'small towns' such as Bath and Springhead, Kent were their dominant feature, in the case of Springhead the religious elements being represented by a group of at least seven temples.

A major temple might be associated with any combination of: subsidiary shrines, a guesthouse, associated service structures, cemeteries and a settlement to accommodate those serving the temple. Alternatively a temple or shrine can sit in apparent isolation, or represent one element in a complex multi-functional townscape in a *vicus* associated with a fort.

Post-Roman shrines are associated with a variety of contemporary buildings and features including cemeteries, churches, settlements, roads, and trackways. They can also be associated with non-contemporary features including Roman temples, Roman roads, hillforts, prehistoric burials and ritual sites and medieval churches, monasteries and cathedrals. They are frequently found in prominent positions on hilltops or close to Roman roads and trackways, and may be associated with natural features such as springs, wells, rivers wetlands and caves. They suggest a wide array of sacred natural places in a wider ritual landscape.

4 Further Reading

For the Roman period the key corpus of structural evidence is M J T Lewis's *Temples in Roman Britain* (1966).

Other important publications include:

W Rodwell (ed), *Temples, Churches and Religion: Recent Research in Roman Britain* (1980);

M Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (1984);

and for Christian sites D Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (2003).

Important site-specific studies include:

R E M and T V Wheeler, *Report on the Prehistoric, Roman and Post-Roman site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire* (1932);

P D C Brown, 'The Church at Richborough', *Britannia* 2 (1971), 225-31;

B Cunliffe and P Davenport, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath* (1985);

G W Meates, *The Roman Villa at Lullingstone, Kent. Volume II: The Wall Paintings and Finds* (1987);

A Woodward and P Leach, *The Uley Shrines* (1993);

J D Shepherd , *The Temple of Mithras, London* (1998);

and A C King and G Soffe 'Hayling Island: a Gallo-Roman temple in Britain', in D Rudling (ed), *Ritual Landscapes of Roman South-East England* (2007).

For the post-Roman period there is no complete source book available but R Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (1989) provides an overview of the evidence for the transition from Pagan to Christian worship during this period, and *A Woodward, Shrines and Sacrifice* (1992) provides a general introduction to the topic.

A more specific analysis of the evidence can be found in J Blair, '*Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes*', Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 8 (1995), 1-28, and for the south-west P A Rahtz and L Watts, 'The End of Roman Temples in the West of Britain' 183-210 in P J Casey (ed), *The End of Roman Britain* (1979).

One site which provided detailed archaeological evidence is reported in B Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering* (1977).

For a brief summary of the place-name evidence D M Wilson, 'A Note on OE hearg and weoh as Place Name Elements Representing Different Tof Pagan Worship Sites', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 4* (1985), 179-83.

A more detailed study can be found in M Gelling, *Place-names in the Landscape* (1984).

See S Semple, 'In the Open Air', in M Carver, A Sanmark and S Semple (eds), *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited* (2010), 21-48, for a landscape-led approach to identifying ritual activity.

5 Where to Get Advice

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